

Peripheral

There are some things you just can't explain. Some things that there's just no reason for, especially when you're on the road around 3:47am and the sky is that dull brightness like light hitting behind a matte grey curtain. You know the feeling. When your eyelids feel weighed down like sandbags on a hot air balloon and you're out of that ultimate tie-off in cheap, convenience store coffee. As you struggle to stay conscious you start to see things you shouldn't see. Shadows and shapes slide just past your eyesight as you bounce your eyes like pong balls from one luminescent paddle on the black road to the other. But you know they're still there. The shapes and things that shouldn't be. Watching. Waiting.

You sit at a red light feeling the encroaching darkness as a chill tickles up your neck, but you can't look back so you fill your sight with the redness. You let the red pound down on you, the big, red light mocking you like the nose of a giant, ephemeral clown waiting to devour you through the windshield before the dark things can take you, but you know it won't keep the slithering, creeping creatures at bay and you swear you feel a breath on your neck from the backseat and the impossible feeling of a hand reaching out to grab your neck when suddenly you're washed in green and you feel the alien appendage recoil in pain and you slam the pedal to the floor and get the hell out of there. You race into the night more awake than ever, fear fueling your awareness in the pitch black; you nearly dodged a bullet back there, don't you realize: can't sleep, clown will eat me. Can't sleep, clown will eat me. You're not sure what's worse, the black things or the red ones, so you just drive and drive until you let yourself notice the deer in the clearing on the side of the road and lament the fate you're barely going to escape, and you drive. Until you see your gas gauge go blink and hear it go bing and see a light far along the road. The light, the light is safe. Perhaps too safe, you wonder. It's suspicious. You just start to get low on gas and just so happen to be

approaching a gas station. It has got to be a trap, and what's worse, you have no choice but to fall for it.

So you pull into the station in front of pump number four and step out under the pale, fluorescent light when a hand lands against your window. It's attached to an attendant's jumpsuit and a nametag that says "Dale." He tells you it's self-service and begins to pump the gas before you can think to speak. So you let him work and sit back down. You notice the way the man's hands look like tree knots gnarled up right next to each other, and how the many stains on the light blue jumpsuit each look different but all the same, signifying a man well-versed in manual labor and illiterate in the ways of a decent dry cleaners. You also notice—not directly, but just outside of your vision, of course—that you never get a look at his face, but you always see a wide smile no matter how the light hits him. You feel the car shift suddenly and notice the man hang up the hose and pull out a rag dirtier than him and hear that distant voice say, "No charge. Have a nice day." You start the car without responding to him, but hesitate. You realize you'll have to leave the light for the darkness again, but at least you won't run out anytime soon. You turn to thank the man but the Cheshire smile is nowhere in sight. You don't stop to think about it and just drive. Make it harder for the black things that dance just outside of sight to find you. But then it isn't the sight anymore that bothers you. No, it's the sound. The sound of the wheels on the road and nothing else. That gaping void of nothingness, that crushing silence. You must get rid of it—you turn on the radio. Light jazz. You feel at peace, relaxed, no longer tortured by suspense. Thank goodness for the saxophone. You roll down the window and let yourself enjoy the cool breeze. The black nothings and simple paranoia are the furthest thing from your mind as the cymbal crashes serenely on the shore of your imagination. What nonsense. Black slithering and creeping creatures and cannibal clowns. What on earth would make you think such silly things?

Then the music changes abruptly. It's a man talking, local news: "A psychopath has escaped from an insane asylum and killed several guards in the process. Police ask people to stay away from gas stations in the area if at all possible because of his MO: he disguises himself as a friendly gas attendant then hides on vehicles until the victim stops and kills

them, taking their identity and leaving their dismembered corpses in the closest ditch. He is extremely dangerous and well known for blending in if not for the murderous smile he seems to be unable to hide. We return you to the previous program still in progress. This is 93.6 L-U-V Smooth Jazz all night long makin' love to your eardrums till the break of dawn. Have we got something special waitin' for you..." And so you drive and you drive and you drive, wondering whenever you fall asleep, wherever you stop, if that will be your time to die.